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ROMILA THAPAR ● HARBANS MUKHIA ● BIPAN CHANDRA

Communalism and the writing of Indian History

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and the writing of
Indian History

By

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PREFACE

THE THREE PAPERS ON Communalism and the Writing of Indian History, included in this book, were originally read (in an abbreviated form) at a Seminar organised by All India Radio on "The Role of the Broadcaster in the Present Communal Situation" in October 1968. The discussion which the papers provoked among the participants persuaded us to publish them and make them available to a wider audience.

In criticising the communal approach to Indian history it is not our intention here to substitute the communal pattern by any other pattern of historical interpretation. As historians we are concerned at the obstruction which the communal interpretation places to the understanding of our history and the study of the subject. The purpose of these papers is to point out these obstructions and the limitations which they impose on a study of Indian history. In discussing this we have touched on those aspects of historical investigation which we feel would provide a more accurate understanding of our history.

ROMILA THAPAR

Communalism and the Writing of Ancient Indian History

ROMILA THAPAR

WHEN MENTION IS MADE OF a communal bias in the interpretation of Indian history it is generally assumed that this bias does not exist among historians writing on the ancient period of Indian history, or that, even if it does exist, it is not very relevant. However, the communal approach to the interpretation and understanding of Indian history is not limited to the medieval and modern periods of history, for, a basically communal approach can also pervert the interpretation and understanding of ancient Indian history. An examination of the ideology of modern communalism shows quite clearly that it seeks its intellectual justification from the historical past. Thus, Hindu communalists try and project an ideal Hindu society in the ancient period and attribute the ills of India to the coming of the 'Muslims'. Equally, Muslim communalists try and prove the roots of separatism from the beginning of the medieval period onwards, i.e., from the 11th or 13th century A.D.

It is often forgotten that historical interpretation can be the product of a contemporary ideology. This was particularly so for theories put forward by historians until very recent years when history was (as it still continues to be in many cases) a narrative of events without much attempt at analysis. The choice of events was conditioned by the historian's predilections and it is in the nature of the choice that the historian's subjectivity can be seen. The interpretation is also influenced by the priority which a historian gives to his sources and the degree to which he is willing to be critical and analytical about his sources.

In trying to understand the question of communalism in the writing of ancient Indian history it would perhaps be best to examine the influence of contemporary ideas on the writing of Indian history in recent centuries. The modern writing of ancient Indian history and studies on ancient Indian culture began in the eighteenth century and from then until the early twentieth century three major trends of thinking are discernible. They may be described as the views of the Orientalists, the Utilitarians and the Nationalists.

Increasing trading contacts between Europe and Asia from the fifteenth century led to a gradual interest on the part of various European scholars and missionaries in the culture of Asia. In the case of India the interest began with a study of languages, particularly Sanskrit and Persian. These studies gained momentum at the end of the eighteenth century with the founding of the Royal Asiatic Society and the systematic recording of work on what was regarded as the classical tradition of India. Most of this work was done by scholars who came to be called Orientalists or Indologists. Those of them who studied Sanskrit became great enthusiasts of the culture of the Aryan speaking peoples. They evolved the theory of the Indo-European homeland and of the common ancestry of the Sanskritic and Greek cultures. The Aryans

were seen as a racial entity, rather than a group of people who spoke related languages, and the dynamics of Aryan culture in India and Greek culture in Europe were sought to be related. There was an exaltation of the Vedic age, and the Orientalists by and large saw the ancient Indians as a people with an idyllic society. The tensions were glossed over and the glory emphasised. This fitted in with the view of orthodox Hindus who anyway believed in the greatness of the Vedas and all that was associated with this literature.

Indian historians who later picked up this train of thought tended to ignore the motivations which had led the Orientalists to glorify ancient Indian society. The most obvious of these motivations was that many of the Orientalists were persons who were alienated from their own society and were extremely suspicious of the historical changes which Europe was undergoing, particularly as a result of industrialisation. Thus they searched for utopias elsewhere, and for many these lay in the ancient cultures of the Orient. Max Mueller who coined for himself the Sanskritic name of Moksha Mula is one example of an attempt at identification with an idealised culture of Indian antiquity. Often the idealisation extended to modern India as well. It is interesting to speculate as to what might have been Max Mueller's actual reactions to India had he visited India during his lifetime in the nineteenth century. The writings of such Orientalists influenced not only Indian circles in as much as many of the religious and social reform movements of the nineteenth century laid stress on Vedic culture as the root of the Indian tradition and made it the ideal, as for example, the Arya Samaj; some aspects of European thinking were also influenced as is evident from movements as diverse as the Romantic movement in European literature and racist doctrines of nineteenth-century Europe. The racist philosopher par excellence, Gobineau, evolved many of his ideas on the basis of the 'Aryan race' and his under-

standing of the caste system of India. The ultimate culmination of such thinking was the rise of Hitlerism in Germany in the twentieth century.

Another reason why the Orientalists had to defend the ancient culture of India was that they were fighting a losing battle with the Utilitarians. These were a group of British philosophers dominant in the nineteenth century. They were convinced that the coming of the British to India was a god-send as British administration and legislation would end the backwardness of India. It would terminate the hitherto unceasing series of despotic rulers and would bring political awareness to the peoples of India. Among the Utilitarians, James Mill was the most distinguished name in terms of influencing Indian historical thinking. What is perhaps the most significant aspect of Mill's *History of British India* was that in a sense it laid the foundation for a communal interpretation of Indian history and thus provided the historical justification for the two-nation theory. He was the first historian to develop the thesis of dividing Indian history into three periods which he called Hindu civilisation, Muslim civilisation and British civilisation (interestingly enough, not Christian civilisation).

That Mill should have used this scheme in such an arbitrary manner is understandable given the intellectual and political background of Utilitarian thinking. What is puzzling however is that this periodisation was accepted by subsequent historians and hardly any attempt was made until very recent years to seriously investigate its validity. Mill's was the first recognised history of India and it made such an impact that its assumptions are still accepted in some circles. Some historians use the nomenclature of ancient, medieval and modern in periodising Indian history but the basis of the division remains the same as that of Mill, i.e., a change in the religion of the major dynasties of the time. Mill's history became the basic text of the administrators in India and British

historians of the nineteenth century came largely from the ranks of the administrators. Another aspect of Mill's *History* was that he was severely critical of Hindu culture and described it as being backward, inimical to progress and antirational. He was more sympathetic to what he called 'Muslim civilisation' although even this was not spared scathing criticism at times. This led to a section of the Orientalists and later to Indian historians having to defend 'Hindu civilisation' even if it meant overglorifying the ancient past.

Indian historians writing in the early twentieth century were inevitably influenced by the national movement. They did not call themselves nationalist historians but their interpretation of Indian history was frequently from a nationalist point of view. They relied more heavily on the work of the Orientalists and once again ancient India, now frequently referred to as Hindu India, came in for considerable glorification. The role of the Orientalists therefore produced a two-fold result: they were primarily responsible for the rediscovery of India's past and thus provided a foundation for the nationalist interest in the past; at the same time in their defence of Indian culture they also provided the ballast for those with an uncritical approach to the past.

The glorification of the ancient past was legitimate to the extent that this is a characteristic of all national movements when there is a search for an identity in the indigenous tradition, and the indigenous tradition is usually taken to be the earliest recognisable historical culture. Where nationalism is coupled with colonialism and an anti-imperialist situation, then the glorification of the past serves as a kind of consolation for the humiliation of the present. Thus those who seek to be critical of the past are seen almost as undermining the nationalist cause. The glorification took the form of a hesitance to admit to the existence of conflicts and tensions in Indian society in the early period, particularly conflicts of a socio-

economic and religious nature. Theoretical works such as the *dharma-shastras* were accepted as descriptions of the reality of ancient Indian life, which was therefore seen as idyllic. One of the essentials of presentday historical analysis, the questioning of the motives of the author of any source, was a technique which was not utilised by earlier historians. Many of the earlier historians were from brahman and kayastha families since facilities in Sanskritic learning were by and large limited to such groups at the time. Consequently the questioning of these classical sources was not very forthcoming. Values which were essential to the national movements such as freedom from foreign domination, democratic institutions, political representation, etc., were sought and their presence assumed in the ancient period. The question of foreign domination for example proved a very difficult problem to bypass in the history of northern India where there have been repeated invasions and conquests from the north-west in the period from 600 B.C. to A.D. 500.

The biggest weakness of the nationalist historians was that they did not challenge Mill's periodisation. This was partly due to the continuing study of political and dynastic history almost to the exclusion of social and economic history. In terms of dynastic history the increasing frequency of Muslim dynasties from the thirteenth century onwards would suggest a Muslim period. But in the context of this periodisation, the glorification of the more remote ancient period meant essentially the glorification of the Hindu period. The distinction between the two periods was thereby made more rigid.

The establishment of Muslim separatism in the political life of India from the 1920's intensified this division. The coming of the Muslims was a convenient way of explaining the collapse of Hindu power and did not require too much intellectual exercise. Few attempts were made to analyse the society of the time in an effort to explain why it was possible for the Turks to establish their power so

quickly. The 'Muslim period' then came to be regarded as a period of decline which logically led through its own inadequacies to the coming of British power. Similarly it was argued that the Muslim period saw the evolution of the two 'nations'—Hindu and Muslim—whose logical outcome in terms of modern national states could only be the partition of the subcontinent into a Hindu-dominated and a Muslim-dominated state. That religious groups in themselves do not constitute a nation was an argument which was not given serious consideration. The communal politics of the 1930's and 1940's added to this interpretation and the separation became sharper. The creation of Pakistan did not however solve the problem for the communal historian. The Hindu communalist still has to contend with the reality of Muslim culture. Hence the attempt to either belittle its importance or emphasise its foreignness.

The above analysis attempts to review briefly the origins of the periodisation of Indian history. It would be appropriate at this point to enquire into the legitimacy of the use of the terms 'Hindu period' and 'Muslim period'.

It is assumed that the period from about 1000 B.C. to A.D. 1200 can be called Hindu because the ruling dynasties of the subcontinent subscribed to the Hindu religion. However even on the basis of dynastic history alone, this period cannot correctly be described as Hindu since there were a number of major dynasties which cannot be fitted into this description—the Mauryas, the Indo-Greeks, the Shakas and the Kushanas. Many of their kings were Buddhists and although not antagonistic to the Hindus, they consciously identified themselves as Buddhists. Should there then be another period called the Buddhist period, the duration of which could be from about 500 B.C. to A.D. 300? Had there been a sufficiently large Buddhist population in existence in India today, this may well have happened.

There is also the question of what is meant by the term Hindu, particularly in this context of periodisation. The term is not found in pre-Islamic sources relating to India.

It was first used by the Arabs and later by others to refer to the people who inhabited the land of Hind (India). The concept of Hindu therefore is not a concept which was evolved and used by those who constituted the Hindus but was a foreign term which was taken up and used by the 'Hindus'. What we would recognise as a Hindu today would hardly have been recognisable in the ancient period. The recognisable Hindu begins to emerge in the post-Gupta period in the post fifth century A.D. There is ample evidence from the sources of the ancient period to suggest that religious sects and groups in pre-Islamic India did not identify themselves as Hindus and as a unified religion. The followers of Buddhism provide a striking contrast in precisely their form of religious organisation. In fact the characteristics of modern Hinduism, particularly the bhakti sects, become recognisably apparent in precisely the medieval period, which communal historians would regard as a period of decline.

Equally pertinent to our discussion is the question of the terminology which the Hindus used to distinguish themselves from the Muslims during the early period, i.e from the seventh to the thirteenth century A.D. It is significant that today when we write about this period of history we bracket together the Arabs, the Turks and the Persians and describe them all by the single term, 'the Muslims'. Yet until the thirteenth century, the word Muslim is rarely used in the sources to describe these various peoples. The sources of this period do not use a religious terminology but refer to them in a purely political manner. Thus the Turks are described as Turushkas, and the Arabs as Yavanas. The word Yavana was used traditionally for all persons coming from west Asia and the Mediterranean irrespective of whether they were Greek, Roman or Arab. The word itself, *Yavana* in Sanskrit is a back-formation of the Prakrit *Yona* and derives ultimately from Ionia, the Ionian Greeks who had the earliest and closest contacts with western Asia.

Another term used for the Turks, Persians and Arabs was *mleccha*. This word again has an ancient ancestry, first occurring in the *Rig Veda*. The term was used primarily for those people who spoke a non-Aryan language and therefore were unfamiliar with Aryan culture. The earliest *mlecchas* were therefore various tribes living mainly in parts of northern and central India and speaking a non-Aryan language. Later and by extension the term was used for foreigners. Here again, *mleccha* was not a religious term but more often a term with a cultural connotation. Therefore the Arabs and the Turks when they are described as *mleccha* are seen as foreigners of an alien culture and are regarded either as political friends or as political enemies. Considering the closeness of contact between the people of the Indian subcontinent and the Arabs, Persians and Turks, both through war and through trade, an antagonistic religious identification would surely have been reflected in the sources of the time. The separate religious identification emerges only after the establishment of Turkish political power in the subcontinent. It is precisely the nature of the organisation of Hinduism which precluded its giving a purely religious identity to the followers of other religions.

And finally, is Mill's periodisation justified even if it is based on changing dynasties? If Indian history is to be seen merely as a chronicle of dynasties with its geographical focus in the Ganges valley, then such a periodisation may apply. In this region dynasties did subscribe by and large to Hindu religious beliefs up to the early thirteenth century after which a series of Muslim dynasties followed. But if one is looking at the subcontinent as a whole then such a system of periodisation is unacceptable. The basic problem in accepting this periodisation, even at a superficial level, is that the coming of Muslim dynasties varies in time from region to region of the Indian subcontinent. Thus the Arabs conquered Sind and established their rule there in the eighth century A.D. The Turks held a part of

the Punjab in the eleventh century. They extended their control over a large part of northern India in the thirteenth century. Muslim dynasties first established their power in the Deccan in the fourteenth century. In the far south, Muslim dynasties did not rule until much later. Thus there is no uniform date for the establishment of Muslim rule. The usual period of division, accepted in most academic courses, is quite arbitrary since it is either A.D. 1000 or A.D. 1200 and can only apply to the history of a part of northern India.

Historical interpretation is integrally related to a people's notion of its culture and its nationality. This in itself makes historical writing one of the most sensitive intellectual areas with wide repercussions on popular nationalism and political beliefs. The communal approach does not always express itself openly or in a consciously antagonistic projection of a particular group, sect or religion. What is even more harmful is the kind of historical writing which is based on communal or near communal assumptions, but such assumptions in a generally uncritical framework are no longer questioned or challenged. The vast majority of practitioners in the field of historical teaching accept these assumptions as historical truths, and refrain from applying any criteria of objective analysis to ascertain afresh the veracity of these assumptions as truths. This is partly because the discipline of history is rarely emphasised in the teaching of history in most universities in India. History remains a continuous narrative of preselected events, where neither the basis for the selection of those particular events is examined, nor their relevance. Students of history therefore are trained to receive a certain body of information which they generally commit to memory and which they then go on repeating ad infinitum when they in turn become teachers of history or when they attempt writing history. Another reason for this highly unsatisfactory situation is that the result of recent research in a particular field of history is

rarely incorporated into standard works and text-books. Thus in most schools and colleges the student of history is still learning the subject, both in content and in technique, as it was taught one generation (if not two) ago.

To be more specific, let us take for example the case of perhaps the most vexed problem in ancient Indian history —the Aryan problem. This had its genesis as we have seen in the work of certain Orientalists, who, on the basis of linguistic evidence in the main, posited the existence of an Aryan race which migrated to northern India and settled in the Punjab and the Ganges valley and gave rise to a culture the study of which is available to us in the Vedic literature. In the last thirty years a considerable amount of archaeological evidence has come to light which forces us to look anew at the notion of Aryan culture. Other aspects of the Aryan problem have also been critically examined and now suggest a considerable reorientation towards the problem. It is extremely difficult for example to prove the existence of a distinct and separate Aryan race. It is equally difficult to insist on the purity of Aryan culture and its complete superimposition on the indigenous culture. The evidence only makes sense if one assumes that Aryan applies only to a language-speaking group and not to an ethnic entity and that Vedic literature reflects the intermixture of Aryan and non-Aryan cultures if the two were in fact ever totally distinct entities.

A reflection of this recent research is rarely found in the standard histories being written to date. In fact many of them tend to reflect the reverse trend, which is being exploited by those who wish to glorify Aryan culture. Attempts are being made to extend the importance of Aryan culture by trying to prove that the Harappan culture was also Aryan, in spite of the fact that the archaeological evidence is quite contrary to this theory. The attempt to prove India as the indigenous home of the Aryans, apart from whatever historical validity it may have is essentially an attempt to pander to a false sense of

national pride and maintain that Aryan culture which in certain circles is believed to be the nucleus of Indian civilisation was completely indigenous. It is doubtless galling for such people to have to accept that Vedic thought was not uniquely and in genesis Indian. The boosting up of Aryan culture relates in direct proportion to the propagation of the Hindu interpretation of Indian history. It is quite feasible to argue that the culture represented in the Vedic literature was largely indigenous. The logical position would be to study the pre-Vedic cultures from their archaeological remains and see the extent to which Vedic culture evolved from these. This insistence on the dominant role of Aryan culture in Indian history also stems from an unanalytical use of the literary sources and the almost complete exclusion of archaeological evidence. What makes it worse is that the description of the Aryan way of life is not even accurate. To deny for example that on certain occasions the Aryans ate beef and drank alcohol is to deny the evidence of both literary and archaeological sources.

The Aryan problem is not the only problem which requires reconsideration. The 'Golden Age' of the Guptas represents a series of paradoxes. It is described as a period of Hindu renaissance. The main artistic achievements were Buddhist (sculpture and painting) and were associated with the monasteries. The scientific achievements were partly indigenous and partly cosmopolitan—as represented in the earlier tradition of Charaka and Sushruta, of Aryabhatta and the somewhat later tradition of Varahamihira. In spite of the emphasis on nonviolence as essential to the best Hindu tradition, the glorification of Samudragupta is largely based on his prowess as a military conqueror. The major evidence therefore for a Hindu renaissance lies in the writings of Kalidasa, the composition of the early Puranas and the coins and inscriptions of the Gupta kings which would suggest that they were patrons of Hindu sects. Is the Hindu renaissance, such as it was, therefore an essential part of the golden age?

There are many assumptions in relations to early Indian history which although not directly communal do get easily absorbed into a communal viewpoint since these assumptions are rarely placed in the correct historical context. The implicit faith in the spirituality of Indian culture is one such assumption. The theory that Indians were always concerned with metaphysics and philosophical speculation and not with the mundane things of everyday living has now become an accepted idea. Yet the idea is comparatively recent, having been widely propounded by writers in the nineteenth century. It was first propounded by those seeking a utopia in the ancient Indian system and by those who believed that this may be an effective way of keeping the minds of Indians away from such mundane but essential things as industrialisation, technological development and freedom from foreign rule. The notion was eagerly taken up by Indian scholars who found in it an ideal counterpoise to their humiliation at being subservient to a foreign power. Few sought to face the question squarely. What exactly does spirituality mean and what does it imply in terms of a total culture? For most people the spiritual content of Indian culture can perhaps be summed up in the belief that there was leisure to contemplate the Infinite. But Indian culture did not have a monopoly on spiritual content. The same characteristics as are associated with Indian spirituality can be found in many other ancient cultures and are frequently recognisable in traditional societies. Not surprisingly, the ancient Indians never saw themselves as more spiritual than their neighbours in adjoining or in far-away lands. Nor did visitors from other equally significant cultures, such as the Greeks, the Chinese and the Arabs notice any markedly distinctive spiritual characteristics. An even more pertinent question is, which sections of society were given to spiritual activities—to the contemplation of the Infinite, to mysticism, to philosophical speculation? Obviously only a small

section. The discourses of the Upanishads were carried out by only a minority of the Aryan community. Even the hymns of the *Rig Veda* were composed by a small group. The fact that only this literature has survived does not mean that the entire community consisted of priests and rishis. The evidence of the Vedic literature in itself points to a community concerned with the mundane things of everyday life. The early centuries A.D. saw considerable activity among various schools of philosophy, and among a number of new religious sects; yet the creative literature of this period, as for example the plays of Kalidasa, hardly points to the existence of much spirituality in court circles. Perhaps the most authentic comment on Indian spirituality comes from the Hindu tradition itself, where the four aims of man are described as *dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha*. Of these only the last connotes pure spirituality. Material gain and pleasure are given due importance, and stress is laid on the correct balance of the four.

Another aspect of the spiritual basis of Indian culture is nonviolence. This has gained prominence since the association of Gandhi's ideas on nonviolence with the national movement. The philosophical notion of nonviolence has a long history in Indian thought and was first developed as a dominant theme in Buddhist and Jaina philosophy. As a philosophical idea it was by no means unique to India. Early Christianity taught the same idea, although it was certainly more central to Buddhist teaching than to Christian teaching. But Buddhism did not survive in India. A distinction as to be maintained between nonviolence as a philosophical concept and the practice of nonviolence. There is very little evidence to suggest that in practice violence was avoided. Aggression frequently took violent forms. Some of the major events in the Indian tradition are associated with violence, a case in point being the *Bhagvad-gita* and the Mahabharata war.

The only outstanding exception to this (and indeed a personality unique to more than just the Indian cultural

context) was the emperor Ashoka, who after a ruthless military campaign gradually turned to nonviolence and what is more enunciated a political policy based on nonviolence. But he remains the sole major historical figure in a position of power to have done so. Even with regard to him there are strange contradictions. Whereas on the one hand he is acclaimed for his policy of nonviolence, on the other hand he is held responsible for the disintegration of the Mauryan empire, the argument being that his policy of nonviolence resulted in a militarily effete and ineffectual country which could not withstand the invaders from the north-west. The great heroes of early Indian history Ajatashatru, Chandragupta Maurya, Kanishka, Samudragupta, Harsha, Pulakeshin II, Mahendravarman Pallava, Rajendra Chola et al, are heroes primarily because they were conquerers. Year after year, thousands of students of history proclaim Samudragupta as the Indian Napoleon (after Vincent Smith) and glory in his actions in uprooting kings and tribal chiefs in victory after victory. One wonders where the nonviolence comes in.

The lack of a consistent approach is apparent in another theme as well. Mahmud of Ghazni is primarily associated in most standard histories as the despoiler of temples and the breaker of idols. The explanation for this activity is readily provided by the fact that he was a Muslim—the assumption being that only a Muslim would despoil temples and break idols since the Islamic religion is opposed to idol worship. There is the further assumption in this that all Muslim rulers could be potential idol-breakers unless some other factors prevented them from doing so. Little attempt is made to search for further explanations regarding Mahmud's behaviour. Other reasons can be found when one turns to the tradition of Hindu kings and enquires whether any of them were despoilers of temples and idol-breakers. Here we come across the case of Harsha, an eleventh century king of Kashmir, for whom the despoiling of temples was an organised, institutionalised

activity. Kalhana informs us in the *Rajatarangini* that Harsha appointed a special officer, the *devotpatananayaka* (literally, the officer appointed for the uprooting of the gods) whose special job it was to plunder the temples. Here clearly the explanation cannot be that he was a religious iconoclast but that he plundered temples for their wealth which wealth he used for other purposes.

The comments made so far do not arise out of a desire to merely criticise the communal approach. They are motivated by two main factors. Firstly, that the communal interpretation of history is poor-quality history. Even where there is no directly communal interpretation but there is acceptance of given theories because of mental inertia, the result is poor-quality history. The study of history is an advancing discipline utilising new techniques and methods of analysis. A careful historiographical study can clearly demonstrate the changes in the methods and techniques. Existing assumptions must always be questioned and if they are found to be weak in evidence and support, they must be discarded. The second factor pertains to the contemporary situation. Historians cannot allow the discipline of history to degenerate to the extent that false history becomes instrumental in the promotion of political mythology. Since historians can, consciously or unconsciously, become the intellectual progenitors of political beliefs, the analysis of history thereby becomes particularly crucial to political ideologies.

The study of ancient Indian history is now gradually being subjected to a variety of new techniques of investigation and the incorporation of new sources. This change is not unique to ancient Indian history but is being applied to the study of all classical cultures, largely as a result of the advances in social science research particularly in anthropology and archaeology. Furthermore the systematic study of all types of societies has opened up new perspectives in the historical study of ancient societies.

As a result of these developments there has been a

considerable advance in the analytical study of literary sources which is beginning to throw fresh light on the ancient past. Such an analytical study raises a number of questions. Firstly, is the text, which is being used as a source, a theoretical work or a description of actual conditions? Such a question is particularly relevant in using the *dharma-shastras* as source material. If it were to be continually kept in mind that these were essentially legal documents relating to a code of behaviour and not a description of actual conditions in every case, then the study of society in ancient India would become far more precise. The description of the caste structure as the *varna* system of the *dharma-shastras* is now being questioned, particularly in the light of sociological analyses of Indian society.

The second question tries to relate sources to their social background. Does a particular source represent conditions or events relating to the whole of society or to a particular group? Most literary sources which have survived from ancient times tend to relate to elite groups—kings, important priests, monasteries, wealthy merchants, etc. Consequently there is more information on the upper sections of society. Furthermore in most traditional societies it was generally only the elite groups who had access to education and could therefore record their activities in the form of literature. The plays of Kalidasa for instance are excellent historical material for a study of royalty and court circles. But to try and suggest that the whole of Indian society acted in the manner described in the plays would be to present a historically inaccurate picture of the times. Here it is necessary to try and use other sources to fill out the picture.

Early Buddhist literature forms an admirable counterpart to brahmanical literature of the same period, since it reflects the activities of a different section of society. Since sources reflect the culture of a particular group in society they often tend to be one-sided. The need to be continually

looking for other categories of sources is most effectively demonstrated by the fact that if brahmanical sources alone had been consulted then the reign of Ashoka would have gone practically unrecorded. He is merely mentioned as one of the Mauryan kings in a list of kings given in the Puranas. Our information on his reign is not derived from brahmanical literature but from his own inscriptions and from Buddhist sources.

An equally curious case is the virtual disappearance of discussion of the Charvaka and Lokayata philosophies in brahmanical literature. Our evidence for the existence of philosophers supporting a materialist school of thought has to be gleaned in an incidental form from Buddhist, Jaina and Ajivika literature and from stray inscriptions.

The most important new source of evidence for historians of ancient India is archaeology. Techniques of archaeological excavation have now been improved to the extent that the interpretation of archaeological data can provide substantial evidence for historical reconstruction. It is unfortunate that historians of ancient India make so little use of archaeological data since the evidence which it provides is of major importance. Whereas literary evidence is largely concerned with the life of the elite, archaeological evidence provides information not only on the life of the elite but also of the common people. Habitation sites and cities when they are excavated reveal evidence of people at all levels of society. Literary evidence has been used more often than not so far mainly to obtain lists of kings and their doings. Archaeology is not concerned with the names of kings. We now know so much about the various types of citizens who lived in the Harappan cities that it is possible to almost reconstruct their daily life, yet we do not know the name of even a single one of their rulers. Archaeology thus demonstrates that the pursuit of compiling dynastic tables may be of interest to a few but is marginal to the essential study of the past. In a sense therefore archaeological evidence gives a

new dimension to the study of ancient history.

Another reason for its importance is that it fills in gaps in existing knowledge. The beginnings of Indian history can now be traced back to remote antiquity not on the basis of the obvious myths of ancient literature but on the basis of concrete evidence from archaeology. More important, the foundations of Indian civilisation—the Harappan culture and the post-Harappan cultures—can now be more clearly defined. The emergence of Aryan culture does not take place in a kind of cultural vacuum in the Indo-Gangetic plain. It has now to be placed in the context of existing and previous cultures.

Material remains, which are the 'facts' which archaeologists study, can also be used to either confirm the literary evidence or else to contradict it. Material remains from what are believed to be Aryan settlements—the painted grey ware sites of the Ganges plain—suggest a fairly simple people, primitive agriculturalists without a sophisticated pattern of living. The rather grandiose picture painted in Vedic sources may well be taken as literary flourish. A remarkable case of confirmation comes from the excavation at Hastinapur, which shows clear evidence of destruction by flood as is mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. The shifting of the capital to Kaushambi is also suggested by the earliest evidence at the latter site being of the same period as the flood at Hastinapur. The Mauryan period also produces some interesting corroboration of literary and archaeological evidence.

Statistical information is another product of archaeological data. Objects of everyday use, such as pottery, beads, implements of various kinds, are found in abundance. Pottery for example is an excellent base for statistical work. Not only does the shape and texture provide evidence of the pattern of living, but the distribution of a particular type of pottery in any geographical region can give clues to trade and commercial distribution or migrations of people. The area of distribution of the famous

northern black polished ware—a luxury ware of the immediately pre-Mauryan and Mauryan period—conforms closely to the actual extent of the Mauryan empire. Coins also make an excellent base for statistical studies.

Inscriptions, often included as a part of archaeology, form a link between archaeology and history. Inscriptions tend to be far more accurate as data on a particular period than literary sources. They are perforce brief as inscribing is a difficult process. Thus, with the exception of the *prashastis* or eulogies, most of them contain minimum, essential information. The great advantage which inscriptions have over literary sources is that once they are engraved they cannot be tampered with; passages cannot be changed or added as they often are in the editing or rewriting of literary material over the centuries. Inscriptions not only contain information on political history but often much more information on social and economic conditions. The land grant inscriptions of the post-Gupta period because they are legal charters pertaining to the granting of land are providing very interesting evidence on this period, which evidence may possibly change our entire understanding of this period. For example it has frequently been maintained that the caste system became more rigid at this time and this was an important cause in the inability of India to meet the challenge of the Turkish and Afghan invasions. It is now being shown that far from becoming rigid there was considerable mobility in the caste structure during this period.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of archaeological data is that it forces the historian to move from what has now become an arid study of dynasties and events relating to royalty, to the more purposeful study of society as a whole. The fact that archaeology is concerned with the study of material remains and that it uses technological change as a basis for recognising cultural and other changes directs attention to these much neglected aspects of the ancient past such as social structure, the economy, and technological change. Dynastic history is merely a part of the much larger fabric which goes into the making of history.

The analytical study of literary sources or the utilisation of new evidence from archaeology is in itself not enough. New lines of approach to source materials must be followed up with relevant themes of investigation—relevant in both an academic and an intellectual sense. The real crux of dynastic history is not the genealogy of kings but the notion of power, both the concept of power and the distribution of power. Was the king the centre of power or was power channelled into various institutions and offices? If the theory of Oriental despotism or the stress on the total benevolence of the ancient Indian monarch is to be challenged, then a viable historical analysis must be made. In any case the notion of power cannot be studied without a precise understanding of the economic structure. The sources of revenue in terms of both human labour and produce, and the distribution of revenue at various levels of society are essential to understanding the concept and distribution of power. Extra-economic factors such as religious charisma play their own role but need to be studied in the same context. Social structure implies studying the evolution of the caste structure. Did the social structure actually function according to the rules of the *varnashrama-dharma*? If so then how did various non-kshatriyas become rulers, to mention only one glaring instance of a discrepancy between theory and practice. Or did this discrepancy only relate to positions of political power? What were the points of identity between the economic structure and the caste structure?

Even more important is the theme which is rarely studied by Indian historians, namely the nature of conflicts between various groups. Every society gives expression to conflicts and tensions, yet in the ancient Indian case these have never been properly defined and studied. More often than not there is a tendency to try and whitewash references to tensions, until of course we come to the medieval

period where certain historians go out of their way to list and emphasise the tensions between Hindus and Muslims. But the tensions between Hindus and Muslims in the post-1206 period, even when they were based on religious involvements, cannot be properly understood unless we know the nature of tensions in the earlier period. In the ancient period the evidence for political tensions is very clear in the references to usurpation of thrones, assassination of kings and wars. In what way did these affect the rest of society? Frequent wars must have created economic tensions as well. Differences of opinion among religious groups must have brought about their own variety of tensions. The constant plea of the emperor Ashoka for tolerance would not have been necessary had there not been some amount of intolerance among groups of various kinds. What were the facets to the difference of opinion between the brahmans and the Charvakas which ultimately led to the removal of reference to Charvaka thinking in brahmanical philosophical literature? Why did certain religions appeal more to particular groups, such as the appeal of Buddhism to commercial groups and the women of the royal families? Why were the majority of Jainas throughout Indian history members of the mercantile community? Did these factors become the nuclei of tensions?

Equally relevant is the study of why tensions took on the dimensions of conflicts in certain cases. What was the nature of the conflict between the Aryans and the Dasyus and Panis; was it racial as has been frequently maintained, or was it because of cultural maladjustment? What was the nature of conflict between the indigenous people and those whom they regarded as foreign? What was the process by which the Greeks and the Scythians came to be called *vratyakshatriyas* and how were they assimilated into Indian society? How exactly did the Indians of the prethirteenth centuries view the Arabs and the Turks?

The purpose of asking such questions is not to indulge in intellectual exercise but to suggest that only such

questions can make the study of history meaningful. The relevance of these questions can be made apparent in two ways. First of all, they can be and should be asked of every period of Indian history since they are legitimate questions for every stage in the development of a society. Answers to these questions based on analytical study will provide the genuine continuity of Indian history. Secondly, these questions can bring into clearer focus the understanding of various sections of the past. A clearer focus can reveal valuable comparative insights indicating both the major factors and the marginal factors which have influenced the direction of Indian history. It is only then that we shall understand not only the true nature of the impact of Islam in Indian history but in fact the true nature of all the forces that have gone into the creation of the Indian past.

Medieval Indian History and the Communal Approach

HARBANS MUKHIA

FOR VERY LONG NOW THE term 'Muslim India' has characterised more than seven centuries of our medieval history; and it continues to be very much in circulation.

The apparent rationale of such a communal characterisation of the medieval period of our history is the fact that the religion of the new rulers of India from the 11th or the 13th century A.D. onwards is Islam while the earlier rulers were Hindu. Apart from the serious flaws in such a characterisation pointed out earlier by Dr Thapar, there are two underlying assumptions to it which are open to question:

1. a history of the ruler's life or the ruling family or, at best, the ruling class is considered the equivalent of the history of India and the personal religion of the ruler is taken to be the determining factor;
2. a static view of Islam is taken over a thousand years and from Arabia to India. All the changes wrought in Islam by the centuries and the distances are ignored:

changes from the concept of social equality which was basic to the 7th century Islam in Arabia to the establishment of absolute monarchy and exclusive governing class in India from the 13th century onwards and such monarchies and governing classes elsewhere earlier or later.

And absolute monarchy and exclusive governing class are antagonistic to the concept of social equality. Also Islam really meant different things to different people—to Ala-ud-din Khalji and Muhammad Tughlaq, to Akbar and Aurangzeb, to the ulema and the sufi saints, although they all swear by it.

Thus what is presented to us as the History of Medieval India is really a part of history and what is considered the determining factor is really quite unimportant. What we really should study in history is the stage of the development of society from one point of time to another, the changes in the society's system of production and the resultant social organisation, etc. Such a study would be a study of the whole society in the past and the personal religion of the ruler would indeed become irrelevant. In fact even the political history that we are taught is really a history of the ruling dynasties. There has been little analysis of various groups—regional, religious, racial, etc. —which comprise the ruling class and their points of compromise as well as conflicts which in turn produce various pressures compelling the rulers to follow one policy or another at a given point of time.

One facilitating factor for writing the political history of medieval India the way it has been written is the ready availability of the sources of information, or the works of the contemporary historians,* which also deal almost exclusively with the history of the court. Thus, for example,

* The phrase 'contemporary historians' here refers to historians who were the sultans' contemporaries. For the historians of today or of the recent past the phrase 'modern historans' is used.

we have Zia-ud-din Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi*, Abul Fazl's *Akbar Nama*, etc. However, the character of these contemporary works was seldom analysed before making use of them.

A significant fact about the contemporary historians upon whom we depend for our information is that they were all courtiers or aspired to that position. As such they were aligned with one faction of the court or another. Thus the court was the focal point of their attention and the events they have narrated in their works are directly or indirectly related to it. Therefore even the terminology they used is related to the particular context of the court history.

Let us take a very sensitive term by way of illustration —the term 'Hindu'.

The historians being courtiers and belonging to the nobility were interested in preserving the *status quo* in the complexion and composition of the nobilily and in the relationship between the nobility and the ruler. Zia Barani, a great theoretician, apart from being a professional historian of the mid-fourteenth century, insists on both these points in his work the *Fatawa-i-Jahandari* which has been translated into English by Prof. M. Habib and Mrs. Afsar Khan under the title *The Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate*. On the one hand Barani suggests that only persons of high birth, that is persons belonging to a select group of families, be admitted into the imperial nobility thus guaranteeing preservation of the *status quo* in its complexion and composition: and on the other hand he advises the sultans to convene an advisory council the membership of which should be based on high-birth, the meetings be conducted through a laid-down procedure, members should be free to express their opinions without any fear or expectation, etc. The advisory council would thus institutionalise the relationship between the sultan and the nobility in which no arbitrary change would be possible.

Now, the main threat to this *status quo* emanated from the Hindu rajas, raos, ranas, rais, zamindars, etc. who were themselves a very significant part of the larger ruling class as we shall see later. When, therefore, the contemporary historians advocate the annihilation of the Hindus they desire the annihilation only of this section of the Hindu community rather than the entire community including the peasantry, the taxes paid by whom sustained the historians themselves along with the Hindu rajas and Muslim *iqtadars* in their luxurious life. Therefore the term 'Hindu' as used by the contemporary historians has application only to a section of the Hindu community which was politically and socially important; it has been used almost in a political rather than religious sense.

Thus the terminology used by the contemporary historians is relevant only to the internal tensions and conflicts and compromises within the ruling class which consisted both of Hindus and Muslims. These conflicts within the ruling class are not reflections of conflicts at the social level.

Secondly, the subjective element in the works of the contemporary historians is very strong. Often they write not of what had happened but what they wished to have happened.

The modern historians, sometimes even those who were consciously secular in their outlook, understood the terminology used by the contemporary historians to apply to the whole society. Consequently the conflicts within the ruling class were understood to be conflicts at the social level. Thus Sultan Ala-ud-din Khalji, who took some strong measures to suppress the rebellious Hindu zamindars (along with no less strong measures to suppress the Muslim *iqtadars*, including very pious people who had nothing to do with rebellion), is portrayed as a religious fanatic who was utterly intolerant of the Hindus, although his contemporary historian, Zia Barani, keeps wailing

that Ala-ud-din Khalji was a sultan who cared not a thing for the Islamic law whether in matters of state or in his private life. Similarly the attempts by some rulers like Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb to convert some politically important individuals or families are portrayed as attempts to convert the Hindus into Muslims at the social or mass level.

Secondly, these modern historians failed to identify and isolate the wishful element of the contemporary historians thus placing full reliance on every word they had written. Apart from the fact that such reliance is against all norms of historical studies, it is interesting that the more communal a Hindu historian is today the more he relies on the words of contemporary orthodox Muslim historian.

The 'nationalist' historians* of the 1920's, 30's and 40's tried to meet the challenge of the communalists with all sincerity; but unfortunately they chose to fight the adversary on *his* ground. That is, like the communalists they did not go beyond the court to study the whole society and its dynamics. Secondly, while the communalist historians ignored or deliberately set aside evidence to the contrary, the 'nationalists' did the same although for contrary and certainly better objectives.

Thus the basic approach of the communal and the nationalist historians was the same. This at a certain stage led the nationalist to yield the ground to the communalist.

To illustrate this point: until recently the history of medieval India had centred on individual rulers and the ruler's will or nature was supposed to cause the occurrence of all historical events during his reign. Thus Ala-ud-din Khalji's conquest of vast territories was the result of his ambitious nature. Or, the mad schemes of Muham-

* By 'nationalist' historians is meant those who believed that the medieval Indian history was not a picture of unmitigated communal conflict but of a glorious communal harmony.

mad Tughlaq flowed from an imbalanced mixture of contradictory qualities in his nature. Or, Akbar pursued a liberal religious policy because he possessed a liberal disposition. This is how both the communalists and the nationalists had interpreted the history of medieval India. Once one accepts that the liberal religious policy of Akbar was only the reflection of his own liberal outlook, the conclusion becomes inescapable, for instance, that the fanatic religious policy of Aurangzeb flowed from his fanatic disposition.

Thus considerations of liberalism and orthodoxy enter into the discussion of policies which were not the result merely of the liberal or the fanatic disposition of this ruler or that, but of the compulsions of concrete political situation and the balance of group and sectional alignments prevailing in each case. The communal historian can also afford to shower praises on Akbar's liberalism, for having done that he would be free to condemn every other ruler with the charge of dogmatism. To eulogise Akbar as a 'secular' and a 'national' ruler is firstly unhistorical, for the medieval Indian state (or any other medieval state for that matter) could not, by its very nature, be secular, for the concept of the secular state is a very modern concept: so modern indeed that some of us have not yet been able to adjust ourselves even to the concept itself and probably much less to its practice. Secondly, such an approach defeats its own purpose by implying that barring the fifty years of Akbar's reign, the state during the other six-and-a-half centuries was nonsecular and hence theocratic and therefore Akbar's reign was a mere chance, an aberration.

Thus, our approach to history can be genuinely and logically secular only when we change our whole approach towards history itself and study the history of the society rather than that of an individual ruler or the ruling class. What we need to study is the whole society, its organisation and character which give rise to the contradictory pheno-

mena of communal harmony and disharmony at contiguous points of time, if not simultaneously, the region of this harmony as well as the conflict, etc. If we study the *society* we do not then have to suppress one aspect of it in order to highlight another as both the nationalists and the communalists tended to do.

II

The rise of Islam in the 7th century Arabia exercised a considerable progressive influence on the contemporary world. When Prophet Muhammad preached the doctrine of one God—there is no God except God—he was suggesting a great social change. For the concept of one God meant the concept of social equality. If there is only one God and He has created all, then everybody is equal before him as children are before the father and therefore eveyone is equal to every other. Thus the concept of the Muslim brotherhood (the *millat*) also sprang up from this basic premise. Also Islam did not sanction any exclusive governing class or even an exclusive priestly class.

From the late 7th and the 8th centuries onwards, however, with the extension of Islam into vast areas and the establishment of huge empires, particularly after the conquest of Persia with its highly developed civilisation and administrative system, an exclusive governing class led by an absolutist monarch claiming divine rights begins to make its appearance. Correspondingly, the concept of social equality also begins to recede into the background, for of necessity social equality had to yield the ground to its own antithesis—an exclusive governing class with an absolute monarch on top to protect it. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni is the first sultan normally recognised as such; and this recognition also marks the formal liquidation of the principle of social equality among the Muslims. Thus in the 11th and 13th centuries and later we stood face to face with ambitious empire-builders expanding their empires no less at one another's cost than at the cost of the infidels.

The Turks came to India as a brave, fighting ruling class out in search of territory rather than as religious missionaries with sword in hand.

What was the process of the establishment of the Turkish rule in India? Was it through large-scale massacre of the Hindu population? Or was it through forced conversion of the Hindus? What explains the complete absence of any popular resistance to the advancement of the Turkish arms?

The Turks who established the empire in the 12th-13th centuries came here with roughly 12,000 soldiers. Through superior military organisation and tactics they defeated the Hindu rulers whose military and economic resources, in many cases even of individual rulers, were much larger than those of the Turks. Victory in the field of battle, however, is not the equivalent of the establishment of an empire. And the Turks must have realised that defeating the concentrated military resources of the enemy in the field of battle was comparatively easier; but if they attempted to displace the existing administrative personnel from the central to the village levels, the resistance they would encounter would be too widespread to overcome. Therefore, having defeated the great rulers they made a ready compromise with the lower levels of the old Hindu ruling class—with the rajas, the ranas, the zamindars, the chaudharis, etc. The terms of the compromise were that the zamindars, etc. were not deprived of their lands, nor of their position and privileges, provided that they paid a fixed annual tribute to the sultan. So long as they paid their tribute in full and in time—which also signified the acceptance of the sultan's suzerainty—and so long as they did not attack one another, they were not displaced, nor were they interfered with in the administration of their lands.

Thus the lower rungs of the administration remained completely in the hands of the Hindus. It is the Hindus who thus helped the Turks establish their empire and they ran its administration for them. But for their support

the Turks could not have been able to stay in India for any but a small length of time. Those Hindus became very much a part of the ruling class for they as much as the Turks were living off the surplus produce of the peasant. In fact historians like Barani and others use the term 'Hindu' only to refer to that section of the community which had become a part of the imperial ruling class as has been stated above.

The tensions within the ruling class for obvious political or economic reasons are often given a religious or ideological colour. By way of illustration we might refer to the revolt of one Ali Shah Nathu during the reign of Muhammad Tughlaq. A certain land had been assigned to Nathu, a Khalji, from which he was to collect revenue. Some time later one Bharan, a Hindu, brought to the notice of the authorities the amount of embezzlement in which Nathu had been revelling, and the land was thereupon transferred to Bharan himself. Nathu and his brothers protested to the sultan against the imposition of an infidel over them as administrator, and, failing to dissuade the sultan, they revolted.

There is no evidence, indeed, to suggest that the state engaged itself in converting the Hindus into Muslims on a mass level or in a ferment, zealous effort to propagate the faith. The only conversions, or suggestions to that effect, by the state that we know of are conversion of politically important individuals or families but never at the mass level; and this too strangely enough was not done in the initial stages—when it would have made more sense—but at a much later stage of medieval Indian history. One could perhaps argue that by converting these important individuals of families the rulers would expect their followers also to follow suit. It is noteworthy, however, that invariably only such persons were suggested conversion who had committed a rebellion or shown disloyalty to the state or some such thing. In such cases, because of their importance the state really liked to forgive them and wanted from them some commitment to an unreserved loyalty to the state. And in medieval conditions, when religion was considered the highest value in life, giving up one's own religion and accepting that of the emperor was considered the most unqualified acceptance of loyalty to the state. Otherwise why is it that such of the Hindu subjects, or rajas and anas and Rajput nobles, who had been otherwise loyal and efficient, were never asked to accept Islam?

One could perhaps also argue that the **jazia** was a compulsion on the Hindus to become Muslims. For one thing, however, that by becoming Muslims they would then have to pay the **zakat** which was a tax exclusively levied on the Muslims. Secondly, the evidence regarding the **jazia** is very confusing. Ibn Battuta, a fourteenth-century traveller, tells us that in South India the **jazia** was collected by a Hindu ruler (the Zamorin) from his Jewish subjects. Outside India we know of **jazia** being imposed by Muslim rulers on their Muslim subjects. Also that the **jazia** was not collected from women, children, invalids, brahmins (except in the reign of Firuz Tughlaq) and soldiers. Even if one were to concede the **jazia** as a purely religious tax, did the Hindus really consider their religion so cheap as to exchange it for exemption (which is not even an exemption for as Muslims they would pay the **zakat**) from paying a paltry sum of money. And finally, if it is argued that the Hindus would accept Islam for saving some money and nothing else, could it not be argued that the state imposed the **jazia** for making some money and nothing else?

Similarly the demolition of temples. Interestingly the orthodox Hindu historians today revel no less in describing with great fanfare the temples demolished by the sultans than the orthodox Muslim contemporary historians did in their own time. It is obvious that the demolition of temples could not have been meant for winning over the Hindus to Islam. For, how can one imagine that the way of winning over the heart of a people is to go and demolish its temples? The demolition could at best have created a hatred, if anything, certainly not love, for Islam in the hearts of the Hindu subjects. Therefore it could

not have been meant for converting them, but for some other objective. It is significant that generally the temples are demolished only in the territory of an enemy; they are not demolished within the sultan's own empire, unless the temples became centres of a conspiracy or a rebellion against the state as they did during Aurangzeb's reign. Thus the demolition of temples in enemy-territory was symbolic of conquest by the sultan. Incidentally, many Hindu rulers also did the same with temples in enemy-territory long before the Muslims had emerged as a political challenge to these kingdoms. Subhatavarman, the Parmara ruler (1193-1210 A.D.), attacked Gujarat and plundered a large number of Jain temples at Dabhoi and Cambay. Harsha, ruler of Kashmir, who has been referred to earlier, plundered all the temples in his own kingdom barring four in order to replenish his treasury, and not a word of protest was uttered. And when he needed still more money and enhanced the amount of tribute due from his subordinate feudal lords he was dragged down the streets of Srinagar and was done to death.

It is not denied that there was conversion. But mostly, at the mass level, it was voluntary conversion or may be as a consequence of the popularity of the sufi saints who lived among the people and talked to them in their own language. It is only suggesed that the state did not engage itself in any mass-scale conversion. If the state had, then the contemporary historians, who were very orthodox Muslims, would have mentioned such facts with great fanfare and manifold exaggeration.

It is interesting to note that while the emperor Ashoka went all out to spread Buddhism and convert people and officially used the state machinery for the purpose we look upon him as a great emperor; but in medieval India the state did not even interest itself in proselytising, yet it stands condemned, as it were, in the popular mind as an agency of converting people to Islam and nothing more. At the back of such an attitude is our own latent communalism which reacts unfavourably to such a 'conversion' and a conscious effort has to be made to fight it.

It is not suggested here that the state in medieval India was a perfectly secular state; it could not have been that for the very concept of a secular state is a very modern concept and historically it is not applicable to the medieval centuries or earlier. Therefore even if the state had engaged in proselytising, one should be able to understand that as one is able to understand it in the case of Ashoka.

The medieval Indian state was, however, negatively secular, so to say, in that it subordinated religion to politics rather than politics to religion. While the sultans employed the ulema in highly paid jobs without much responsibility in order to use their influence on the people for all that it was worth for their political ends, the ulema were, with very few exceptions, eager to carry out the sultan's bidding and interpret the Islamic law to suit his convenience. The ulema are bitterly criticised by the sufis for selling themselves off to the state for some cheap lucre and they are not wrong. An interesting example out of innumerable ones might illustrate the point. Badauni, a courtier-historian of Akbar's time, tells us that the emperor had nine wives while the religious law sanctioned only four. Akbar put the issue to an assembly of the ulema. One of them, obviously overeager to gain imperial favours, suggested that the law had provided that a Muslim could have 2-2, 3-3, 4-4 wives, i.e. 18 in all. Some others thought he was going too far and said the number of marriages permitted was 2, 3, 4, i.e., 9.

III

It is not that simultaneously with conversion, voluntary or otherwise, the neo-Muslims were immediately accepted as full members of the ruling class. In fact, the lower-caste converts were utterly detested by the Muslims belonging to the upper levels of society. Barani, in a **firman** which he fabricates and ascribes to Caliph Mamun, states thus (and what he says applies to the Muslims only for the **firman** is ascribed to a Caliph): "Teachers of every kind are to be sternly ordered not to thrust precious stones

down the throats of dogs or to put collars of gold round the necks of pigs and bears—that is, to the mean, the ignoble and the worthless, to shopkeepers and the low-born they are to teach nothing more than the rules about prayer, fasting... etc.'

On the other hand was the ruling class, consisting of both Muslims and Hindus, or **iqtadars** (later on **mansabdars**) and zamindars. The **iqtadars** initially were all Turks and no non-Turk, Muslim or non-Muslim, was tolerated in the higher echelons of political power. Later on the names of Indian Muslims and even Hindus are heard of in the highest posts. In the time of the Mughals, of course, the Rajputs and others like Raja Todar Mal and Birbal are some of the most illustrious officers of the state. The zamindars were all Hindus to begin with. In the later stages, however, we hear of some Muslim zamindars also.

There were unending battles among the various groups and individuals transcending every limit—regional, religious and racial. The Muslim nobles revolt against the sultans and fight among themselves; so do the Hindus. And they fight with each other no less than among themselves for the sake of revenue and political power. And yet there was much in common among them. They both subsisted on the revenue paid to them by the peasant out of his surplus produce. They both indulged in conspicuous consumption far beyond their enormous means. The amount of indebtedness was a measure of their honour; the larger the amount the more honourable they were. Their life was a replica of their overlords. The immense patronage of the arts was an incidental result of the values of their times; they vied with one another in maintaining large numbers of poets, musicians, etc. And not the least, both of them shared a very contemptuous attitude towards the masses of people, Hindus and Muslims alike.

Earlier we raised a question: Why was there no popular resistance to the Turkish invasion? Or, to the Mughal invasion later on? The only popular resistance movements that we know of belong to the 17th century when

the peasantry revolted in the Maharashtra, the Punjab and the Agra-Mathura regions against the increasing economic burden on it.

There might be two broad reasons for this: (1) the existing social and political system could not inspire the people to the defence of their Rajput masters who, after all, even today form a bare 8 per cent of the population of Rajasthan. At any rate the people were quite familiar with the Turks, through the latter's first cousins—the Rajputs—who originally belonged to the same land, and to the same level of civilisation as the Turks. And there was nothing particularly hideous in the Turks which they had not tolerated in the Rajputs; and (2) the Turks did not disturb the existing political and social structure; they only made marginal superstructural changes.

Thus the region of the conflict was limited to the ruling class. There could be tension within the imperial ruling class as is attested to by the numerous revolts of the jagirdars, both Hindu and Muslim; or, it could be between two ruling groups as is shown by the heroic but futile deeds of Rana Pratap who, after all, was fighting not even for Rajputana, much less for India, but for his own principality.

Significantly, even in the 17th century when great popular uprisings took place like the Maratha uprising, the Sikh and the Jat uprisings, and these led to enormous conflicts between the Marathas and the Mughal state, the Sikhs and the Mughal state, etc. they did not lead to communal riots at the social level even in the worst days of Aurangzeb's 'tyranny'—riots which have been occurring so frequently in our own lifetime as probably to blunt the sensitivity of some to their inhumanity and their reactionary character, that is when our state is officially a secular state. The causes of these uprisings of the Marathas, Sikhs and Jats are economic and political rather than religious and the conflict remains at that level in spite of all the declarations on behalf of the respective parties to the conflict.

One last question before we conclude: While the Rajputs, who had migrated to India much earlier than the Turks, have retained their identity to this day and have no intention of losing it—the Chauhans, the Pariharas, the Solankis, etc. these are all very familiar names to us even in our personal circles—where are now the descendants of the great dynasties which had ruled over India—the 'Slave' dynasty, the Khalji dynasty, the Tughlaqs, the Lodis and even the Mughals who were the focal point of the great Rebellion a bare hundred years ago? Obviously they have all been submerged in the mainstream of Indian life and, while losing their identity in it, have at the same time enriched it as nothing else has done.

Historians of Modern India and Communalism

Bipan Chandra

At the outset, it may be pointed out that this paper does not deal in the main with the question: why communalism arose and grew in modern India? It essentially tries to trace the connection between the writing and teaching of history and the growth of communalism in India. It also tries to shed some light on the question: why were the Indian historians so prone to taking up a communal position? It is widely accepted today that the teaching of Indian history has a great deal to do with the spread of communalism in the last 100 years. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that a communal historical approach has been, and is, the main ideology of communalism in India. Take away that and hardly anything is left of the communal ideology.

I

We may note in the beginning that both nationalism and communalism are the products of a similar **modern** process

—the growing economic, political, and administrative unity of the country. This process made it imperative to have wider links and loyalties and to base political life and loyalties on new, uniting principles. Both are, therefore, essentially modern, post-18th century phenomena. Nationalists as well as communalists may try to appeal to the past and try to establish links with the ideologies, movements and, in fact, history of the past. But that does not mean that either of the two existed in the past. In fact, Dr Romila Thapar and Shri Harbans Mukhia have shown in their papers that communal identity did not exist in the ancient and medieval periods of Indian history.

Similarly, nationalism was an entirely new organising principle and ideology. This was clearly recognised by the early nationalist leaders such as Surendranath Banerjee and Lokamanya Tilak, who referred to India as a nation in the making. Nationalism as an ideology acquired its **validity** from the fact that it was **correct** reflection of an objective reality: the developing identity of common interests of the Indian people, in particular against the common enemy, foreign imperialism. On the other hand communalism developed in certain areas and sections of society due to their failure to develop the new national consciousness. In other words, communalism was generated by the lack of deeper penetration of nationalist outlook and ideology.

In a situation where wider unity and links among people were becoming essential, appeal to the preexisting principles of compartmentalisation and organisation of social and cultural life, even for the newly-emerging political life, was inevitable in so far as the new principle of organisation, i.e. nationalism, did not penetrate. In other words, where need for identity was obvious and the new national identity was not available, the search for identity led to the older, more familiar identities however unsuitable they might be in the new situation. Identity around religion was of course not the only one available. Caste, language, tribe and region also could, and did, serve the purpose. For example, in Maharashtra where at one time

Hindu communalism was quite strong—and of course it persists as a force till this day—the tables were turned on its leaders by the antibrahmin movement. Something similar happened in Madras. Similarly in South Punjab (now Haryana) casteism organised around Jat-feeling cut the ground from under both Hindu communalists and nationalists.

It would, therefore, be incorrect to treat communalism as a remnant of the past or the revival of traditional ideology. Communalism was, and is, the false consciousness of the historical process of the last 100 years. Later, as we shall see, under the impact of contemporary communal politics, it also became, in the hands of historians, a false representation of the past.

II

In both spheres, i.e., in contemporary politics as well as in modern Indian historiography, the communal view meant accepting the notion that there existed in India religious communities having common social, economic and political interests and possessing the tendency to act as a unity or entity in these fields. The historians usually wrote of Hindus and Muslims 'thinking' or 'speaking' as distinct entities. Sometimes they even wrote of 'Hindu' leaders, 'Muslim' leaders and so on. Thus they applied the two-nation theory (others were to extend it to Sikhs, etc.) to medieval and modern Indian history and created the communal view of Indian politics and society.

While holding the view that Hindus and Muslims together were not integrated into cohesive units at village, local, regional or any other level, the historians with a communal bent of mind rejected the view that Hindus or Muslims were not forming such cohesive units on a religious and communal basis either. They would not accept that Hindus and Muslims were also each separately lacking cohesion, i.e., if Hindus and Muslims together did not form a nation in premodern India, Hindus and Muslims separately did not form homogeneous communities either.

Interestingly enough, the British historians and administrators, who had initiated and developed the entire 'Hindu-Muslim' approach to Indian history, had also talked of caste and race (Bengali race, Punjabi race, Maratha race, etc.) as organising principles for Indian society and politics. They had written of the brahmin domination of the Maratha empire in the 18th century in the same manner as they had written of the Muslim domination of the Delhi sultanate or the Mughal empire. Just as they had talked of Muslim rule, Muslim action and Muslim view, they had talked of brahmin rule, brahmin action and brahmin view. But the Indian historians rejected this latter approach. This shows what role contemporary communal assumptions could play in the writing of Indian history. For example, G. S. Sardesai remarks: "It is said that during Madhav Rao's and Narayana Rao's regime, the Desharthas and Konkanasthas (brahmins) were at loggerheads, but this is not true at all. I can show members of both the castes ranging themselves strongly on opposite sides" (**Main Currents**, p. 182). At the same time Sardesai would not accept the same criterion for rejecting the view that Hindus and Muslims were at loggerheads. In other words, while Indian society is seen as nonhomogeneous or even disintegrated, especially along religious lines, Hindu society is seen as one whole. In fact, this view does not reflect the historical reality, it really reflects Sardesai's and other similar historians' own level of national integration.

The communalist writers, of course, ignored all other principles of organisation but religion. But it was inherent in this approach that others would follow them but replace religion by caste, etc. In fact, many western writers today are reviving the emphasis on caste and language. For example, they insist on seeing the rise of the national movement in India as a reflection not of nationalist, anti-imperialist urges, or of communal-religious consolidation, but of pressures of caste and linguistic loyalty and cohesion. And, of course, many Indian propagators of casteism and linguism, as also of other communalisms such as Sikh communalism, are following suit.

III

Communal ideology might not have penetrated so deep into modern Indian consciousness but for several factors working in the realm of ideology. But before we discuss some of these factors, I would like to stress the point that a full understanding of these factors is not possible unless we fully grasp the extent of this penetration. A student of mine once exclaimed after a discussion of communalism that every time he leaves after discussion with me he thinks he has cleansed his mind of communalism but that during the next discussion it emerges that his thinking is still permeated with large traces of it. The fact of the matter is that many of us who believe ourselves to be pucca nationalists and even those among us who have undertaken to actively propagate the cause of national integration have been deeply though subtly penetrated by the communal approach. This is mainly the result of the the communal view of history and society and culture on which nearly all of us are brought up from our childhood.

As pointed out earlier, the lack of deeper penetration of nationalist ideology has in itself been a factor in the prevalence of communal ideology. In the absence of the wide prevalence of a scientific nationalist outlook, nationalist appeals against communalism, etc., do not make any impact on the people. Nationalism in this case cannot make an appeal to an existing consciousness, while communalism does seem relevant in view of the religious element with which people are familiar in their daily life. This point was firmly grasped by early nationalist leaders and they not only appealed to nationalism but also set out to generate and spread national consciousness. On the other hand, the nationalist leaders during the 1920's and 1930's, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, made the mistake of assuming that national consciousness had already permeated society, as in the western countries, and that their task was merely that of arousing it to a fighting pitch. Thus, their struggle against communalism mainly took the form of telling the people that communalism was antinational. This made no

impact on those people who were not already nationalists. This mistake was perpetuated after 1947. Our educational institutions, mass media, including the newspapers and the All India Radio, and the political parties have made no effort to disseminate among the people a modern, scientific understanding and awareness of nationalism. They have failed to spread a nationalist outlook. Consequently, their formal appeal to nationalism against communalism leaves a large number of people cold. On the contrary, often, while trying to appeal to nationalism, they strengthen the communal outlook by being themselves confused in their nationalism.

IV

Finding the task of inculcating the spirit of modern nationalism—a new spirit among the people a strenuous one especially as this meant revealing to the common people the link between their lives and concerns and the anti-imperialist struggle many of the nationalist leaders took an easy way out. They decided to appeal to the old consciousness, the consciousness of religion. It is true that they did so for an entirely modern and laudable purpose. But by doing so they not only weakened popular understanding of nationalism, but also made their own thinking and writing hostages to communalism. Such was, for example, the approach of Lokamanya Tilak, the early terrorists, Aurobindo Ghose, and Gandhiji in some respects, for example, in his emphasis on Ram Raj and in his policy towards the Khilafat. This approach weakened national integration in one other respect. How could Muslims be expected to get enthusiastic about a national movement based on the religious imagery, theology and practices of the Hindus? In fact, lower castes were yet suppressed and lacking in selfawareness, otherwise they too might have risen in opposition against the symbols reflecting the outlook of the upper castes, as nearly happened in South India.

The British use of Indian history to denigrate Indian

national character and to 'prove' India's unfitness for independence and democracy produced another distortion in Indian historiography and politics. The Indians countered this unscientific and unhistorical approach with an unhistorical approach of their own. They began to glorify the past. This is not the place to deal with the historical validity of this approach. Obviously, its mainspring was the need for national identity and pride. What was unfortunate from the national point of view, however, was that the past chosen for glorification was the ancient past. This was partially because of the fact that the period of Mughal rule was still fresh in the memory of the people and could not, therefore, be easily glamourised. On the other hand, the ancient past was remote and known only through official or near official texts. In fact what applied to Mughal rule also applied to the Maratha empire and Ranjit Singh's administration, which therefore had to wait for full grown communalism to develop to be glorified. Thus gradually developed several myths, each one of which weakened healthy, secular nationalism and gave an opening to, if not strengthened, communalism. And, of course, each one of these myths gained its strength, as well as the infinite capacity to do harm, from the fact that it is believed in and propagated by many staunch nationalists and secular-minded persons.

First of these myths is the belief that Indian society and culture—Indian civilisation—had reached a high watermark, the Golden Age, in ancient India, from which high watermark it gradually slided downwards during the medieval period—branded the period of decay and of 'foreign rule'—and continued to slide down till the revivalist movements made partial recovery but that the real task of reviving the past glory and civilisation still remains. To repeat, I wonder how many educated Hindus are there who do not subscribe to this view in its essentials. The next step, of blaming this decay on 'Islam' or 'Muslim' rule, and the alien west, was easily taken. And, of course, the educated Muslims reacted by harking back to the 'Golden Age of Arab achievements, for how could they accept that their

religion has been the causative factor in the 'decay' of Indian civilisation. Needless to say, if communal ideology is to be uprooted, our educational system, the political parties and the mass media should stop propagating this illogical and unhistorical view and stress the historical development of Indian culture through various ages and through various streams. I may also once again point out that the widely prevailing model is bound to lead to further mischief. Already the DMK movement in Madras has refused to accept it. Whenever the lower castes become vocal and selfconscious they will rebel against any model of the Golden Age which is based upon caste hierarchy and domination. Nor will the tribal people relish it.

The second myth arose out of the necessity to prove that India of the ancient past—the Golden Age—had made the highest achievement in human civilisation. But this was obviously not true in material civilisation, cranks who talk of atom bombs and aeroplanes in ancient India notwithstanding. Therefore the myth that Indian genius lay in 'spiritualism' in which respect it was superior to the 'materialistic' west. Thus it was said by Aurobindo Ghose that while the west had developed reason, science and capacity to produce goods, 'India developed the spiritual mind working upon the other powers of man and exceeding them, the intuitive reason, the philosophical harmony of the dharma informed by the religious spirit, the sense of the eternal and the infinite'. Even Indian caste system was superior to western class because the latter was based on material considerations while the former rested on a spiritual and moral basis. Interestingly, the Chinese Confucian mandarins had evolved a similar slogan almost at the same time, for they too believed that Confucian China had reached a higher stage of achievement in civilisation than modern western Europe. And so they had talked of 'Chinese learning for the fundamental principles, western learning for practical application'. This view was encouraged both in India and China by western writers and authorities for they wanted the people of these countries to

leave the 'material' tasks of administration and management of the economy to the imperialist powers of the west while they revelled in their 'spiritual' tasks and functions.

The third was the Aryan myth, which was a copy of the Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon myths, and was the Indian response to the white racialist doctrines. This was the myth that the Indian people were 'Aryans' and that the 'pure' Indian culture and society were those of the Aryan, Vedic period.

All the three myths encouraged a backward-looking mental outlook and discouraged that faith in progress, that faith in the future, which lies at the heart of healthy nationalism. For example, they did not encourage the people to boldly accept the historical weaknesses of their society and to work for their removal through developments in the present and the future. They encouraged them to glory in the fact that they had once been great.

These myths fostered, as well as reflected, the belief that the Indian historical process was an exceptional one and was not, therefore, a part and parcel of universal history.

These myths were also, by their nature, unacceptable to the vast majority of the Indian people, as I have pointed out earlier. Interestingly, all three of them were borrowed from the west in spite of their claims of 'real' Indianness. The notion of the Golden Age and the use of the past to arouse and inspire the people were borrowed consciously from the European national movements The idea of Indian spiritualism was originally propagated by the British to prove the unfitness of Indians to manage mundane affairs on their own. The Aryan myth's ancestry is no secret. But such myths had not done as much damage in Italy or Greece or Poland because their societies were not as full of diverse religions and cultural elements or castes as India. Here, their positive value in arousing nationalist feeling and a sense of sacrifice for the nation were soon exhausted—often in the lifetime of the second generation of nationalist leadership—while the

long-term price is being paid to this day. Any genuine effort at correcting the misuse of history for communal purposes must also come to grips with these myths.

V

A major point I would like to make in this paper is that communalism among a section of the Indian people, especially among the historians, spread mainly because of its ability to serve as 'vicarious' or 'backdoor' nationalism. Communalism enabled them to feel nationalistic without opposing imperialism, the foreign power that was then ruling and oppressing the Indian people. It enabled them to combine personal safety with nationalist sentiments. Let me explain this point at length.

Most of the modern Indian historians showed little overt, direct, frank concern with nationalism. They did not take up questions that overt concern with nationalism would indicate or lead to. The pressing problems with which people of India were faced did not find reflection in their research either at the level of choice of topics or their treatment. They did not look upon the militant national struggle then going on as the central or the crucial problem of the day, not only from the national but also from the historian's angle. In fact, I suspect that if most of them saw any crucial question at all, it was not that of the nationalist struggle but that of official constitutional change and of Britain's 'trustee-role' transforming British rule gradually, step by step, from 'benevolent despotism' to 'benevolent democracy'. Thus most of the modern Indian historians showed little awareness of the national ethos and, of course, shared so little of it.

The Indian historian was in this respect on the horns of a dilemma. A fundamental political struggle was going on in India since the 1870's and in particular since 1905 between the rulers and the ruled, between foreign imperialism and the rising national movement. But living in this period of intense and living antagonism, most of the Indian historians found themselves, mostly because

of their being employed in government-run or government-controlled institutions, unable to actively side with the ruled; yet, except for the most sycophantic among them, they could not side with the rulers either, at least not emotionally. Moreover, they were part of the nationalist era; their own nationalism desired expression.

The chief way out of the dilemma was vicarious or 'backdoor' or 'false' nationalism, which took the form of regionalism and communalism which could satisfy their nationalist urge and yet not be looked askance at by the authorities, who encouraged any and all approaches which would create divisions in Indian society. Thus the strange tendency of failure to be real-life nationalists and anti-imperialists and of an all out effort to be 'illusory' nationalists, as we may call them. Thus the phenomenon that those who coveted British titles even in the heyday of nationalism, and even earned them, became fiery nationalists in their treatment of Rajput or Sikh or Maratha chieftains. I may also point out, in parenthesis, that this is also true of communal parties and individuals before 1947. Active communalists were seldom active nationalists, especially in the era of struggle after 1919.

In the case of 'vicarious' nationalists among the Indian historians, nationalism found expression not in criticism of British rule but in praise of Indian rulers of the 18th and 19th centuries as well as of the earlier centuries. Their nationalism did not take the direct form of anti-imperialism, i.e., exposure through historical studies of the nature of British rule, its motivations, exploitative policies, etc. Rather, their nationalism, because it was vicarious, took the indirect form of glorification of ancient and medieval Indian empires and rulers as also the rulers of 18th-and 19th-century Indian states, of discovering nationalism in the Punjab, Rajputana or Mysore or even the Jats, and most of all, full blown nationalism among the Marathas, and of popular base of and benevolent character of many of the Indian rulers. Here we come across such sonorous phrases as 'liberation of motherland' or 'homeland', 'children of the soil', 'national welfare',

'popular leaders', etc. But even here, seldom were those, who actually fought against British rule, for example leaders in the Revolt 1857, glorified. It may also be noted in this context that no academic historian wrote on any aspect of the Indian national movement. On the other hand, 'vicarious' nationalism led to distortions which have greatly damaged Indian historiography as well as Indian politics.

VI

Many of the modern Indian historians projected the contemporary communal politics into the past, leading to the tendency to look upon 18th-century politics as a struggle between Hindus and Muslims which continued into the 19th and 20th centuries. For the 18th century, many historians tend to look upon this socalled struggle as the dominant problem of the period. This communal view also finds expression, as noted earlier, in the effort to see Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims as distinct, separate socio-political entities. In its extreme form, even 'Islam' is made an active entity—almost given a personality. 'Islam' conquers, 'Islam' thinks, 'Islam' decides, 'Islam' benefits. There is also the tendency to treat the Mughals and other medieval Muslim rulers as 'foreigners'. Some historians even talk of Hindu and Muslim principles of land revenue and administration, and so on. The Maratha empire and states, Rajput states and chiefs, Jat chiefs, etc., are all lumped together as Hindu states, while the southern and northern states headed by Muslim rulers are described as Muslim states. We have, thanks to these and British historians of India, got so used to such characterisations that we tend to forget that perhaps nowhere else in the world do such characterisations prevail. Interestingly, none of them describe the British rule as Christian rule even though the higher bureaucracy was Christian to a far greater extent than the higher nobility of the Mughals was Muslim.

In fact, the communal historians turned every fact or evidence topsyturvy to prove the 'Hindu' character of the

Maratha states, the Rajput states and chiefs, etc., and even that of the Punjab under Ranjit Singh. First this picture or hypothesis is accepted as the starting point, then all other 'facts' are fitted in. Inconvenient facts or incidents are usually explained away by treating those chiefs and rulers, who do not conform to this picture, and who in fact often constitute the majority of their own sample, as 'bad' men, 'bad' Hindus, 'traitors' to the 'community' or 'nation', and 'selfish' creatures. Inconvenient actions of even a 'good' Hindu ruler are explained away as aberrations. Similarly, if it becomes evident that the Hindu chiefs did not act in concert or even according to a set pattern in defence of Hinduism, or that they did not combine on a religious basis even for political ends, this is not taken to prove that no such communal digits prevailed at the time. Rather it proves to the communal historian that Hindus have had a natural tendency to get divided or to act selfishly.

VII

Communal approach in history-writing is thus an aspect of 'vicarious' nationalism as well as a reflection of contemporary communalism, a sort of 'Hindu nationalism' and 'Muslim nationalism' projected backwards.

But it is also the carrying on of the European bias. To some extent the Indian students of European history tended to project the Catholic-Protestant struggle into India as Hindu-Muslim struggle. Moreover nearly all the basic generalisations regarding the Hindu and Muslim character of the Indian states, of Hindu-Muslim struggle in the 18th century and before, of Hindu-Muslim antagonism in 19th and 20th centuries had been made earlier by British historians and publicists. Indians merely followed in their footsteps. It was easy to do so because the British officials did not object to a communal interpretation of history or the glorification of the ancient and medieval rulers and 'heroes'. They unfailingly suppressed only the effort to criticise British imperialism itself.

The communal approach of many of the historians is also to some extent the product of their preoccupation with military-diplomatic history where considerations of religion appear important. Many factors are balanced and appealed to in diplomatic and military alliances. Appeals to marriage ties, kinship, language, 'race', caste, as well as religion are made, without any of them being necessarily the main factor leading to the alliances which are invariably based on the hard considerations of interest.

The communal view would, however, have been virtually dissolved if history had been studied and written in its wider sense. For example, economic history would have revealed class interests, class solidarity and class antagonisms which cut across religious frontiers. By revealing economic exploitation it would have destroyed the notion of communal equality or solidarity among people following a common religion. Division of society between those who produce economic surplus and those who appropriate it would have formed multireligious groups on both sides of the line. Social and economic history would have revealed that there was no Muslim rule under the sultans or the Mughals. All the Muslims did not form the ruling class. The Muslim masses were as poor and oppressed as the Hindu masses. Moreover both of them were looked down upon as low creatures by the rulers, nobles, chiefs and zamindars, whether Hindu or Muslim. Social history would show that if the Hindus were divided by caste, among Muslims the Sharif Muslims behaved as a superior caste over the Ajlaf or lower class Muslims. Administrative history, by revealing the employment policy, revenue policy, basis of administration, etc., would have shown the hollowness of the notion of the Muslim or Hindu character of the medieval and 18th century states (e.g. similarity between Maratha, Mughal and even British revenue administration) and the inoperativeness of the communal approach in actual administration. Even a careful study of political history would have brought out that the politics of Indian states, as politics the world over, were moved by considerations of economic and political interests and not by

considerations of religion. Rulers as well as rebels used religious appeals as an outer colouring to disguise the play of material interests and ambitions. Social and cultural history would have brought out the forces of cultural cooperation and integration and the emergence of a composite culture at the top, as well as harmonious Hindu-Muslim relation at the lower, village level. They would have shown that in the 18th century, or in the 20th for that matter, an upper class Muslim had far more in common culturally with an upper class Hindu than he had with a lower class Muslim. Or that a Panjabi Hindu stood closer culturally to a Panjabi Muslim than to a Bengali Hindu; and, of course, the same was true of a Bengali Muslim in relation to a Bengali Hindu and a Panjabi Muslim.

Social and cultural history would have also revealed social divisions and diversities other than those based on religion; for example, those based on sect, caste, etc. For example, there was the fierce struggle between the right-hand castes and the left-hand castes in 18th century Madras. Would one be justified in describing this conflict in terms of a two-nation theory? Even such a simple demographic fact as that the population of the Rajputs in Rajputana was only 6.4 per cent in 1901 would throw a flood of light on the socalled national or Hindu struggles of the medieval Rajputana states. Most of all, the study of the life of the common people and their role in social, economic and political development would have shown the utter inapplicability of the communal approach to history. It may also be pointed out that if the historians had dealt with imperialism and the national movement, they would have been compelled to take note of the common subjection and common interests of all Indian people in the struggle against imperialism.

The historians of the 1920's and 1930's, who adopted the communal approach, are of course not to be anathematised. Many of them were not fully aware of the weaknesses of their approach. It is only when history has fully worked itself out that the full implications of events and approaches become clear. But we, who have lived through the partition

of 1947 and who are daily feeling the necessity of national integration, have to realise that the communal approach had hardly anything to offer and has not only caused immense damage but can cause even more of it in the future. For example, much before the Muslim League created the two-nation theory, Indian historians, as also the British, had created their own earlier version of it—what may be called the one-nation theory—that the Indian nation meant the Hindu nation, that the Indian people meant the Hindus, that Muslim rule was foreign rule and, therefore, the Muslims were foreigners and outsiders in India, and so on.

VIII

Since the Indian national movement and the Indian social and religious reform movements were the products of a historical process, and were created through a process of groping and trial and error in a new and rapidly developing situation, it was inevitable that they would contain mutually contradictory aspects. They were also bound to generate and give expression to both healthy and unhealthy tendencies. At a time when Indians began to grope towards nationalism, it was inevitable that communalism, casteism, etc. would intermingle with the developing nationalism. It is the function of the developing movement, its leadership and later generations to constantly go on separating the gold from the dross, and if they fail to do so, the blame is much more theirs than that of the pioneers, just as punishment for faulty thinking too is visited upon them.

Unfortunately the tendency to accept uncritically the past has prevented this healthy process of crystallisation and separation in Indian politics and has done, and is still doing, immense damage. We have adopted an uncritical attitude towards the 19th-century reform movements and 20th-century political movements. We live in cliches so far as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayananda, Vivekanand, Aurobindo Ghose, Lokamanya Tilak, Lajpat Rai, Gandhiji and others are concerned. It has become a tradition with our mass media, school text-books, All India

Radio, etc. to uncritically praise them. Consequently, the communalists, and others can exploit their negative features. We never tell the people, especially the young, that these great men, being men, had imperfect understanding and also imperfect actions.

While excusable at the time, though having some injurious effects even at the time, their imperfection could prove disastrous in another historical context. In fact, the habit of uncritically praising them is a sort of surrender before communalists, casteists, etc. For, we are able to see others like Gokhale, Ranade, Dadabhai Naoroji and B. C. Pal in their historical context. We recognise their great contribution to the growth of nationalism even while criticising their weakness in not firmly struggling against imperialism. It is equally necessary to see and point out that some of the 19th and 20th centuries Indian leaders made great contribution but that at the same time their understanding of the relation between religion and politics, of the role of caste system, or of the problems of history, or of the making of Indian society in history, or of the religious minorities was at fault. It is particularly important that our text-books, the newspapers, the All India Radio, and the political leadership must stop being all things to all men, thus even indirectly strengthening the forces of national disintegration.

IX

The communal approach to history, the vicarious nationalism, the policy of being a 'nationalist' without antagonising the ruling foreign power before 1947, the deep and subtle imprint of communalism on the minds of even secular, nationalist persons, the continuing surrender before communalism and even its propagation by the national mass media and the educational system, and the dangers of a policy of trying to be all things to all men, of a policy of uncritical approach towards the past, including the recent past of the national movement can be illustrated by

taking up a practical example with which all of us are familiar: the creation and propagation of 'national heroes'.

As nationalism emerged in the second half of the 19th century and the task of spreading national consciousness was undertaken by the national leadership, it was felt that the task would be immensely facilitated if 'national heroes' could be held up as examples. The national heroes could also serve as foci for emotional attraction in case of people who could not intellectualise their nationalist commitment. The national heroes were to serve as emotional symbols, a purpose for which they are still used on a wide scale. Secondly, large number of writers, journalists and academics took up the task of creating and propagating the cult of national heroes as an expression of their nationalist urges as well as a part of their day-to-day propagation of nationalism. Thirdly, Indians needed to glorify certain historical characters to counter the British view that the Indian people lacked the capacity or inborn desire for selfgovernment and the needed spirit to fight for it. Lastly, the communal political leaders needed symbols both for the illustration of their historical and political views and to counter the emerging, real-life heroes of the nationalist struggle. And so it came to be that many historical personages, and particularly Rana Pratap, Shivaji and Guru Gobind Singh emerged on the platform, in newspapers and pamphlets, in stories, poems, and dramas, in schools and on the All India Radio as 'national heroes'.

It should be clearly understood that in this process of hero-creation no historical analysis or judgement was involved. It was entirely a political question, a question of political instrumentality or engineering. The validity, the usefulness, the socio-political justification of the choice of this and not that hero had hardly anything to do with historical evidence, role or analysis. The heroes were meant to serve a purpose, they had a role to play in modern Indian politics. This means that their political utility or validity should be analysed from the latter point of view and not on the basis of interpretation of history.

We may now take note of the fact that heroes as political instruments were not chosen out of the large cast of historical characters who had waged, for one reason or another, determined fight against the British. The Rebels of 1857—Bahadur Shah, Rani Jhansi, Nana Saheb, Tantia Topi, Maulana Ahmedulla of Fyzabad, Kunwar Singh—Rani Jindan, Diwan Mulraj, Vasudeo B. Phadke, the Chapekar brothers, the heroes of the Santhal uprising and indigo riots, and later still Khudiram Bose, Kalpana Dutt and the entire range of nationalist leadership.

Similarly, in literature, in northern India for example, that powerful fiery, genuine and modern nationalist play, the **Neel Darpan**, dealing with the indigo struggle was neither staged nor sold in print. On the other hand, nationalism was aroused through popular plays around Prithvi Raj and Hakikat Rai. Of course, in time, the Muslim communalists countered by creating their own separate heroes, often going back to the struggle against the crusaders.

Why was this so? Undoubtedly, most important factor at the time of the creation of hero-myths was the attitude of the British authorities. They frowned upon any expression of genuine nationalism or anti-imperialism. They were particularly allergic to the glorification of persons who had opposed the establishment of their rule. They did not hesitate to take action against any one who wrote or spoke favourably of the heroes of 1857. The large number of school and college teachers, writers, journalists, etc., dependent usually upon official patronage, were not willing to take the risk of displeasing the officials to any marked degree. On the other hand, the officials even encouraged 'vicarious' nationalism for it fitted in with their policy of divide and rule. Thus the history books, school texts in history and literature, were permitted and even encouraged to play up communal, caste and regional 'heroes' so long as the opponents of the raj were kept out. In fact, it may be pointed out that not only in ideology but also in politics the British, the Hindu and

Muslim communalists, and the casteists cooperated to the full, particularly in the struggle against the secular national movement.

It is also of interest to note that it was in the 'moderate' phase of Indian nationalism that most of the hero-myths were created. It is Surendra Nath Banerjee, Justice Ranade, Madan Mohan Malaviya, R. C. Dutt and Tilak in his moderate phase, who created Shivaji, Guru Gobind Singh and Rana Pratap as 'national heroes'. That generation of nationalists regarded British rule as a historical step forward and would not therefore glorify those who had opposed its foundation. Moreover, they were not willing to get on the wrong side of the rulers at that stage of history. We may refer here to British action against Tilak in 1897. The authorities did not at all oppose glorification of Shivaji as an anti-Muslim hero. They, however, stepped in when they felt that Tilak was using the Shivaji cult to propagate anti-British sentiments.

I may once again point out here that the early national leaders had some justification in their creation of the hero-myths. They were just charting the course on an unknown sea; the full implications of their actions were not yet visible to them. It was the task of the later nationalists to have corrected their errors while advancing on their massive contribution.

The hero-myths—all of the major heroes: Rana Pratap, Shivaji and Guru Gobind Singh, belonged to medieval India and had fought against Mughal authority—have done as much to undermine secularism and national integration as any other ideological factor. At one stroke, and in a sort of immanent fashion, these hero-myths proved the case for the two-nation theory or the basic communal approach. By what definition are they 'national' heroes and their struggle a 'national' struggle? Because they were fighting against foreigners? How were the Mughals foreigners? Because they were Muslims. What was the uniting principle in the 'nationalism' of Rana Pratap, Shivaji and Guru Gobind Singh? Their being Hindus or non-

Muslims. Thus, the hero-myths spontaneously generated communalism.

A child or an adult, who heard Rana Pratap or Shivaji being hailed as a 'national' leader, spontaneously accepted the view that a Hindu nation existed in medieval India and that it was in a perpetual confrontation against the 'foreign' Muslims. And so till this day, our text-books, our political leadership, our mass media and in particular the All India Radio, continue to use the medieval hero-myths to arouse nationalism, particularly at times of national crisis, but with much less justification than the pioneers, for their injurious effects are by now obvious and historical personages who were genuine fighters in the real life anti-imperialist struggle are available for glorification. The absurdity of the hero-myths is fully brought out when in innumerable plays on the AIR, e.g. those of Seth Govind Das, every petty struggle by a zamindar or a jagirdar is played up as a national struggle so long as the zamindar happens to be a Rajput or Hindu and the ruler a Muslim.

Let me repeat. This has nothing to do with historical objectivity or integrity. For hero-myths are not the creation of genuine historical writing. They are a political creation and therefore must satisfy the criterion of political usefulness. Secondly, by suggesting that the hero-myths were not, and should not be, played up as 'national heroes', I am not in any way trying to denigrate them or deny them their historical role. Certainly, Shivaji, Rana Pratap, Guru Gobind Singh were important men in their own historical context. But that context was not one of national struggle Otherwise, if we project communalism backwards and declare them as Hindu nationalists, then others might project their secular, integrated nationalism backwards and declare them to be disruptionists of Indian unity, state and, therefore, nationality. While the absurdity of the latter views would be acknowledged by all, we should see that the former view is no less absurd. Moreover to say that a historical character was not a nationalist in an era when nationalism didn't exist is not to denigrate him. Being a 'national hero' is not the only type of badge of

honour. Otherwise, why didn't we declare that anybody who doesn't call Ashoka or Harsh or Guru Nanak or Chaitanya or Akbar national heroes is insulting them? In fact, what I am suggesting is the rescuing of Shivaji, Rana Pratap and Guru Gobind Singh from the misuse to which they have been, and are, being put by the communalists. In fact, Rana Pratap was no more a national hero than Akbar, or Shivaji than Aurangzeb, and so on. Moreover, by giving them a false 'national' character in illusory history, we have been serving an anti-national, disintegrating purpose in modern and contemporary history.

The communal aspect of the hero-myths can be seen in another manner. Surprisingly little effort has been expended by the communalists in installing as 'national leaders' Ashoka or Chandra Gupta or Harsh, etc., even though they lived in the so-called Golden Age. But, then, the communalists know that their names cannot be used to arouse anti-Muslim feeling, their 'nationalism' won't be anti-Muslim nationalism, i.e., communalism. It is also interesting that one of the leading communal historians of today has tried to cut down to size, in the name of historical objectivity, Rani of Jhansi and Nana Saheb, even though they were Hindus and fighting against a real foreign power. But, then, they were not only not fighting a Muslim ruler but were even cooperating with him, going to the extent of acknowledging him as their emperor.

We should also not underestimate the negative impact these hero-myths have on national integration through their impact on minorities and hitherto submerged groups. It is not easy for a Muslim to take part emotionally and feel real enthusiasm for a nationalism whose 'national heroes' win 'national' honour because they fought against the 'foreign' Muslims. As social and political awareness spreads to the lower castes and classses, they may be expected to react in a similar manner against the glorification of zamindars, chiefs and rulers, whose relationship to these castes and classes was that of oppressors and exploiters.

I would also not suggest merely the replacement of these hero-myths with other, more national hero-myths. It is high time our educational system and mass media, including the AIR, as well as the political parties and personalities started placing before people real people, with their positive and negative contributions. This is a better way of giving them political education as well as of inspiring them with high social and political ideals. But if, for some reason, hero-myths are found necessary and inevitable, they should be chosen with care for their effectiveness in serving the ends in view and they should have a firm foundation in reality.